

COMPARISON OF JOHANNES BRAHMS'S RHAPSODY, OP. 119, NO.4 AND
RHAPSODY NO. 2 IN G MINOR, OP. 79

A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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BY

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In order to better understand the defining characteristics of Johannes Brahms's solo piano music, it would be useful to study the influence of Hungarian musical characteristics in his output. Specifically, I wish to study these Hungarian features in his rhapsodies written for solo piano, which may be found in Two Rhapsodies, Op. 79 and the fourth movement of his Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119. To understand the extent of Hungarian musical characteristics in Brahms's rhapsodies for piano, I aim to first identify the general characteristics of the *style hongrois*, a musical style that was used by Western composers that mimicked the style of Hungarian Gypsy music. In addition, I wish to focus on two specific rhapsodies. I will first analyze the fourth movement from Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119, which I performed in my piano recital. The second piece that I will discuss is Rhapsody No.2 in G Minor from Two Rhapsodies, Op.79. By focusing on these two pieces in great depth, I wish to better explain the extent of Hungarian musical characteristics in the rhapsodies composed by Brahms.

Johannes Brahms, who was born in Hamburg in 1833, was a German composer during the Romantic period. He wrote numerous works for solo piano, including sonatas, variation sets, and character pieces of various sizes. In addition, he composed two piano concertos, four piano trios, three piano quartets, and a piano quintet as part of his compositional output.

One style of music that Brahms commonly used in his piano solo output was the *style hongrois*, a specific musical language used by Western composers that imitated the performances of Hungarian Gypsies from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries.¹ This style was often used by Joseph Haydn, Franz Schubert, Franz Liszt, and Brahms. It combined the popular song and dance repertoires of Hungary with the performance style of Gypsies, who were the most

¹ Jonathan Bellman, *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 11.

prominent musicians in Hungary. Music that some consider to be more authentic Hungarian folk music, in contrast, directly influenced the compositions of both Bela Bartok and Zoltan Kodaly.

A few of the musical styles that characterize the overall *style hongrois* are the *hallgato*, *cifra*, and *czardas*.² The *hallgato* was a slow style that was intended for listening, as opposed to dancing. Originally based on popular vocal literature, this style is rhapsodic and improvisatory. In contrast, the *cifra*, meaning “flashy,” is fast and intended for dancing. The *czardas* is a traditional Hungarian national dance that has two main sections. One section is the *lassan*, a slow section set in common time. On the other hand, a *friska* is generally a fast dance song. Within a performance setting, the *czardas* can be considered a series of slow songs and fast dance types.

Along with the *style hongrois*, Brahms was influenced by Edward Remenyi, a Hungarian violinist.³ As early as possibly 1849, shortly after the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, Brahms was drawn to the Hungarian folk music played by Remenyi. After meeting each other, the two musicians began touring together in 1853. It was during this time that Brahms began to incorporate his personal use of the *style hongrois* in his own compositions, which would continue through the rest of his compositional career.

The influence of the Hungarian musical style is evident at the beginning of the Rhapsody in E-flat Major from Op. 119, No. 4. This piece features five-bar phrasing, which is considered a Hungarian feature.⁴ In the first twenty measures, shown below in Example 1, these phrases of five measures each place harmonic emphasis on the first measure of each phrase group. However, starting in measure twenty-one, the harmonic progressions aim towards the downbeat of the fourth measure of each phrase instead of primarily the first measure. This metrical

² Jonathan Bellman, *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 17.

³ Jacob Herzog, “Brahms and the Style Hongrois,” *Revista Brasileira De Musica* 26, no. 1 (January 2013): 52.

⁴ Jacob Herzog, “Brahms and the Style Hongrois,” *Revista Brasileira De Musica* 26, no. 1 (January 2013): 85.

irregularity is often found in Brahms's music.⁵ The fourth measures of these phrases cadence to B-flat major, G major, and C-flat major through measure forty-one, at which point the regular five-bar phrasing resumes as in the beginning of the movement through measure sixty. Tied half-notes in measures sixty-one to sixty-four serve as a transition to measure sixty-five, which marks the beginning of a new section.

Example 1: Brahms, Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119. Fourth movement, mm. 1-25.

⁵ Konrad Wolff, *Masters of the Keyboard: Individual Style Elements in the Piano Music of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, and Brahms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 280.

Another important feature of the *style hongrois*, the *kuruc-fourth*, begins this new section in measure sixty-five. The *kuruc-fourth* is a Hungarian melodic figure that rebounds between the fifth and upper first scale degrees.⁶ The fifth scale degree often has a dotted eighth-note length followed by the first scale degree in the form of a sixteenth note. However, this rhythm is not strict within the *style hongrois* and may change to triplet setting, as seen in Example 2.

Example 2: Brahms, Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119. Fourth movement, mm. 60-76.



The *kuruc-fourth* is presented in both hands in this section of C minor, the relative minor of E-flat major. As soon as the figure is presented in the triplet, the following triplets alter in interval size to sixths, thirds, seconds, and even an augmented fourth by measure seventy-two. In measure seventy-three, tonality shifts to C major, the parallel to C minor. Starting in measure seventy-nine, Brahms blurs the duple meter with a hemiola. Although triplets are presented, the notes in the triplet alternate between an octave on G and moving thirds in the right hand.

⁶ Jonathan Bellman, *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 48.

Hemiolas like these were used liberally by Brahms in his compositions.⁷ Similarly to measures sixty-one to sixty-four, the transition beginning in measure eighty-five is characterized by tied half-notes and abruptly cadences to A-flat major, indicating the key for a separate episode in measure ninety-three.

The melody is presented in the soprano in this opening section and ascends to A-flat before descending chromatically to E-flat. This melodic line, however, is masked when the rolled chords mark each downbeat and the melody in measure ninety-four is written as an alto line. A variation of this three-measure melodic fragment appears in the alto line from measures 101 to 103. This section, which is freer melodically, features rolled chords in the left hand as well. When the subdominant comes in at measure 129, a suggestion of a dominant-tonic progression instead ends on a German sixth chord in first inversion and weakly prepares the new section in C minor.⁸

Measure 133, marked with a piano dynamic level, returns to the triplets and *kuruc*-fourths previously seen in measure 65. This time, the *kuruc*-fourth is shown only in the tenor line. Triplets resume two bars later in measure 135 for both hands. The right hand takes over briefly with the *kuruc*-fourth at measure 141 and continues with this similar motion in different interval sizes through measure 152. When the right hand starts the *kuruc*-fourth, key shifts to C major, the parallel major of C minor, from measure 133. This time, the C major section is marked forte and increases dynamically to fortissimo by measure 145. Momentum builds through measure 152, at which point a tonic chord in second inversion and dominant chord, both marked *sforzando*, suggest a strong cadence to C major.

⁷ Stephen Thomas, "Interpreting Brahms: Practical and Historical Perspectives," in *The Pianist's Craft: Mastering the Works of Great Composers*, ed. Richard Paul Anderson (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 124.

⁸ Frank Samarotto, "Determinism, Prediction, and Inevitability in Brahms's Rhapsody in E-Flat Major, Op. 119, No. 4," *Theory & Practice* 32 (October 2007): 87.

Although the new section that follows in measure 153 continues in C major, the dynamic and mood now shift abruptly. The dynamic level now drops suddenly to pianissimo and presents a more playful mood through light eighth notes. These eighth notes sharply contrast to the previous section's driving triplets. The initial melodic theme from the beginning of the movement is in the top voice of the right-hand chords, seen below in Example 3. Even though the rhythm of the recalled melody is altered, it still maintains the same intervals and begins on the third scale degree of the tonic. The five-measure phrase format returns as well.

Example 3: Brahms, Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119. Fourth movement, mm. 153-164.

118

pp ma ben marc.

senza Ped.

dim.

Measure 168 shifts in articulation to a smooth legato and still maintains the pianissimo dynamic. Brahms, known for incorporating pedal points in his music, includes a pedal point on a low G, the dominant of this section in C minor.⁹ Although G is repeated in different octaves for each measure, the G pedal point remains constant through measure 184. The five-measure phrase

⁹ Konrad Wolff, *Masters of the Keyboard: Individual Style Elements in the Piano Music of Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, and Brahms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 278.

groups are split into groups of three and two measures. Eighth notes in the right hand starting in measure 168 characterize the first three measures, while the following two measures of the phrase group contain quarter notes. When the five-measure phrase repeats a third time in measure 178, an elision occurs in measure 182, seen below in Example 4. Although this phrase ends in this measure, this also marks the beginning of a new five-bar phrase that is also grouped in three and two measures. This time, the first three measures of the new five-bar phrase from measure 182 have quarter notes in the right hand. Measures 185 and 186, the two measures completing this phrase, contain sixteenth notes that crescendo to measure 187. At this point, the five-bar phrases now mirror the harmonic focus on the fourth measure of the phrases from measure twenty-one of the piece.

Example 4: Brahms, Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119. Fourth movement, mm. 172-191.

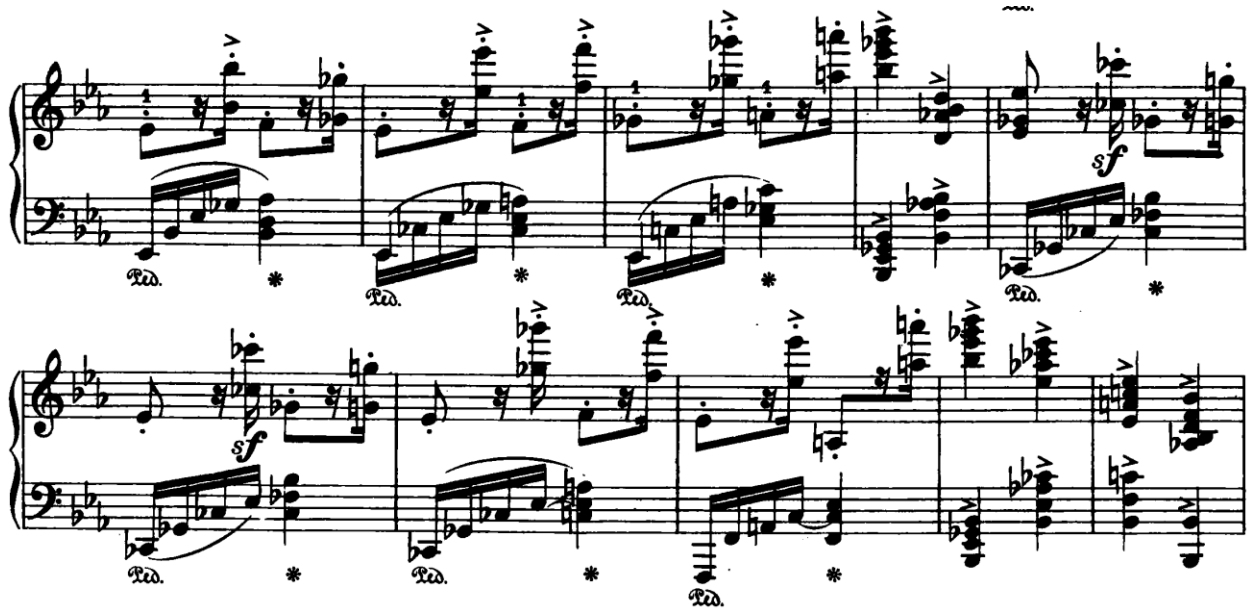
The musical score shows three systems of music. The first system (measures 172-177) shows a five-measure phrase in the right hand, with eighth notes in measures 172-174 and quarter notes in measures 175-176. The left hand has a steady accompaniment. The second system (measures 178-181) repeats the five-measure phrase. The third system (measures 182-187) shows an elision in measure 182, where the phrase ends and a new five-measure phrase begins. The right hand has quarter notes in measures 182-184 and sixteenth notes in measures 185-186, which crescendo into measure 187. The left hand continues with harmonic support. The score includes dynamic markings like *fp* and *pp*, and fingering numbers for the right hand. The edition is by Peters, and the number 9488 is visible at the bottom.

These five-bar phrases continue through measure 202. The quarter notes marking the beginning of the phrase are now presented in octaves for both hands as they move outward in contrary motion. This time, sixteenth notes are now exchanged between the right hand's downward motion and left hand's upward motion. After the hands' brief dialogue with sixteenth-note responses, the left hand takes over the sixteenth notes on the anacrusis of measure 212. The left hand ascends to a G-flat major chord in measure 215 before continuing the sixteenth notes downward to cadence in E-flat major in measure 217. This cadence to E-flat major also indicates a return to the original theme. When a full statement of the theme is performed a third time, it resembles a rondo where the primary A section is repeated and alternates with contrasting sections.¹⁰

A return to this theme, now marked fortissimo, modulates briefly to A-flat minor in measure 232. This modulation to the minor dominant of E-flat major soon shifts to E-flat minor in measure 237 as the rhapsody's parallel minor. E-flat minor is featured as part of the Gypsy scale, which is the harmonic minor scale with a raised fourth scale degree. This explains why the A-naturals, the raised fourth scale degree, occur in measures 240, 244, and 245. Example 5 features an altered version of the *kuruc*-fourth in measure 238, where the B-flat sixteenth-note octave precedes a lone F. This quick sixteenth-note gesture is repeated in the right hand as the left hand accompanies these gestures with ascending sixteenth-note motions.

¹⁰ Denis Matthews, *Brahms Piano Music* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 73.

Example 5: Brahms, Four Piano Pieces, Op. 119. Fourth movement, mm. 238-247.



These gestures arrive at measure 248, which shifts to a thinner texture in triplets between both hands. Similarly to the section in measure 153, the melody from the rhapsody's opening theme returns and is altered rhythmically. This final section crescendos to forte in measure 254. Finally, the piece ends with thunderous chords marked fortissimo and ultimately ends in E-flat minor, the movement's parallel minor.

In contrast, Rhapsody No. 2 in G Minor from Op. 79 has far fewer Hungarian features. The only Hungarian feature is the raised fourth scale degree from the Gypsy scale, which appears once each near the beginning and end of the piece. These Hungarian features, which will later be discussed, are less prominent in this piece as it strays from the free form associated with rhapsodies.

While rhapsodies generally follow a free form, this piece follows sonata form.¹¹ In addition, the rhapsody focuses on interval cycles, which are specialized pitch motives that move

¹¹ Camilla Cai, "Brahms' Short, Late Piano Pieces – Opus Numbers 116-119: A Source Study, An Analysis, and Performance Practice" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1986), 265.

chromatically on a systematic basis.¹² The first pitch-cell motive consists of the soprano's first four notes starting on the anacrusis of measure one, seen below in Example 6. Another four-note pitch cell motive follows immediately on the pick-up to measure two. However, the interval cycle only includes the first two notes from each of these two motives presented, which spells D, E-flat, E-natural, and F. Likewise, two more pitch-cell motives are presented in the soprano from the anacrusis of measure five to measure six. From these two pitch-cell motives, another interval cycle forms chromatically from F-sharp ascending to A. Together, these two interval cycles form a chromatic passage from D to A as part of the piece's first theme. These interval cycles likely contribute to the general tonal ambiguity at the beginning of the piece and make it difficult to identify G minor as a definitive key or solely a key center.¹³ Meanwhile, the soprano line is accompanied by triplets in the tenor and two-note rhythmic motives.

¹² Bren Auerbach, "Tiered Polyphony and Its Determinative Role in the Piano Music of Johannes Brahms," *Journal of Music Theory* 52, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 283-285.

¹³ Beth Greenberg, "Brahms' 'Rhapsody in G Minor, Op. 79, No. 2': A Study of Analyses by Schenker, Schoenberg, and Jonas," *In Theory Only* 1 (December 1975): 24.

Example 6: Brahms, Rhapsody No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 79. Mm. 1-6.

The musical score for measures 1-6 of Brahms' Rhapsody No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 79, is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 1-5) begins with a piano introduction featuring a triplet of eighth notes in the bass (measures 1-2) and a melodic line in the treble. The tempo is marked 'Molto passionato, ma non troppo allegro.' with 'm.g.' (moderato) markings. The second system (measures 6-13) includes dynamic markings like 'f' and 'rit.' (ritardando) leading into 'in tempo'. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings.

An A dominant chord in measure thirteen leads to the second theme in D minor starting on the anacrusis of measure fourteen. On the downbeat of measure fourteen, G-sharp is found in the top two voices. This G-sharp acts as the raised fourth scale degree of D minor, indicating use of the Gypsy scale. The bass part is set as an arpeggiated figure underneath the second theme. A triplet on A and B-flat, which started the second theme, comes once again on the anacrusis to measure twenty-one and is presented an octave below. This triplet figure repeats throughout in the tenor before moving up one octave by the pick-up to measure twenty-five. During this time, the bass takes a more active role rhythmically while the top voice resorts to quarter notes. This continues until the development on the anacrusis of measure thirty-three.

In the development, the pitch-cell motive returns in the soprano. However, the interval cycle returns as octaves in the bass chromatically from D to F. These notes match the first cycle from the exposition. When the key modulates to B minor, a third interval cycle is found in measures forty-four to forty-seven as seen in Example 7. The high soprano line descends chromatically from C-sharp to A-sharp within these four measures. This third interval cycle is

preceded by the same four notes, but in ascending order twice in the bass from measure forty to forty-four. Ultimately, this third interval cycle, in conjunction with the first two interval cycles from the exposition, outlines the complete chromatic scale.

Example 7: Brahms, Rhapsody No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 79. Mm. 42-47.



Part of the second theme returns in the anacrusis of measure fifty-four, which is still in B minor. The key signature change in measure sixty-one suggests a modulation to G minor. However, the key of G minor is not confirmed until a four-three suspension of the dominant in measure sixty-three leads to G minor in measure sixty-five. The ascending pitch-cell motive from the exposition's first theme returns at this point. Now, this is underlined by the insistent triplets from the second theme and continues until the recapitulation in measure eighty-six.

Similarly to the exposition, the first theme begins with two interval cycles with the same ascending pitches from D to A. When the second theme arrives, it then proceeds to G minor as expected after the dominant D chord from measure ninety-eight. On the downbeat of measure ninety-nine, the raised fourth scale degree from the Gypsy scale returns as octave C-sharps.

When the repetitive triplet figures return in measure 106, the piece remains in G minor. In measure 116, a held G-minor chord that lasts for seven measures begins to close out the piece. Finally, the piece unexpectedly ends with a dominant-tonic progression marked fortissimo, which was preceded by a pianissimo and decrescendo.

The extent of influence concerning the *style hongrois* in these two rhapsodies is markedly different. In the rhapsody of Op. 119, use of five-measure phrases, the Gypsy scale, and the *kuruc*-fourth suggest significant Hungarian influence. These features of the *style hongrois* in turn help in observing and understanding other traits of Brahms's compositional style, including tonality shifts and metrical placement. Rhapsody No. 2 in G Minor from Op. 79, on the other hand, employed use of interval cycles as its main compositional technique. Hungarian features were less prevalent, with influence extending only as far as the Gypsy scale. With these features of the *style hongrois* in focus, it becomes more manageable to discuss and identify the compositional techniques of Brahms's rhapsodies.

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